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The Messiah Pulpit

A Statement To My People On the Eve of War

By

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A Statement To My People On the Eve of War

To-morrow morning (April 2), there will assemble in the capital city of the nation the Congress of these United States, called together in special session by proclamation of the President, to consider matters of grave moment in the life of the Republic. This assemblage of the chosen representatives of our people promises to be the most fateful in our history. Unless events now unforeseen, unexpected and in the highest degree improbable intervene, the Congress will either affirm that this country is in a state of war, or will do the more formal and decisive thing of issuing a declaration of war against the Imperial German Government. In either case, the destinies of this nation will be immediately and irretrievably committed to the operation of forces which have long since passed beyond the control of those who first released them. What this impending action of our government means, what consequences of triumph or disaster it will bring down upon us, to what ends of civilization or barbarism it will lead us, no man can say. We are entering blindly upon hidden ways, of which the direction and goal lie altogether beyond our ken. But that the character of our Republic will be fundamentally altered for better or for worse, and the higher interests of humanity irreparably damaged or immeasurably glorified by our entrance into the Great War, is certain. Nothing either in this country or in Europe will ever be the same again. What we bear or forebear in this coming week changes the currents of human destiny forever. To say that we are facing the most fateful moment that America will ever know, though a score of centuries be added to her pres-

ent span of years, is only to state a fact as obvious as it is awful.

It is in anticipation of the world-shaking events which a week or a day may bring upon us in this country, and in fulfillment of the duty which I conceive these probable events impose upon me as a religious teacher, that I have chosen this morning, as on the Sunday following the severance of diplomatic relations with Germany, to lay aside my sermon, and speak to you as simply and directly as possible upon the state of the nation. I do not deceive myself into believing that what I say here will influence public affairs, reach any other ears than your own, or even be long remembered by you who are my friends. But I am not unmindful of the fact that there are obligations of my high office which must be discharged even amid the crash of worlds. Thus I cannot forget, in times like these, what I owe to my own soul—that it shall not be hidden away from the knowledge of men's minds, but be revealed so fully and so clearly that not a shadow of misunderstanding shall abide. At the moment when I was ordained to be a minister of God, I conceive that I was commanded to throw wide open the portals of my heart, that all who cared might see its innermost recesses of conviction; and I do not propose that even the terror of this hour shall bar that threshold from the public gaze. Furthermore, I cannot forget what I owe to you, my beloved people. You have a right to know what I shall say and do in the event of war, upon what road of doctrine I shall set my feet, into what hazards of pain and peril I shall lead this church. The pew is always entitled to the full confession of the pulpit, but never so urgently as at the time when such confession touches the deep issues of life and death. If there be any here who is tempted to question the wisdom or the sincerity of what I am now doing, let him think for a moment of how easy it would have been for me to keep silent, avoid the questions which are to-day setting the son "at variance against his father, the daughter against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law," and trust to

the kindly sentiments of personal affection, conceived, nourished and matured through ten years of labor in this parish, to sustain the relationship between minister and people unbroken, till happier times should come again to earth. The easiest way, however, in this instance as in all instances, would have been dishonorable, and, in the long run, disastrous. The only honest, the only safe way, is for me to ask you to look me in the face this day—to "search me and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts"—and then to determine whether my God is your God, and we can worship and work together in war as in peace. Therefore, before the bugles sing and the flags are lifted high, I ask you to hear me. My purpose is not to argue or persuade. I would not even exhort or plead, much less instruct. I propose simply to speak my whole mind on the present crisis, and then leave with you my fate.

On the morning of Sunday, March 7, 1915, I declared in this church my absolute and unalterable opposition to war. "War," I said, "is never justifiable at any time or under any circumstances. No man is wise enough, no nation is important enough, no human interest is precious enough, to justify the wholesale destruction and murder which constitute the essence of war. . . . War is hate, and hate has no place within the human heart. War is death, and death has no place within the realm of life. War is hell, and hell has no more place in the human order than in the divine." I then asked what "this means in practical terms to-day?" And I answered, "It means not only that war is unjustifiable in general, but that this English war is unjustifiable for Englishmen, and this German war is unjustifiable for Germans. It means that this war which may in the folly of men, come to America to-morrow, is unjustifiable for Americans."

These words spoken in this place more than two years ago, I must reaffirm this day. Nothing has happened in this period of time to change my opinion of war. On the contrary, much has happened to strengthen and confirm it. I do not deny that war, like polygamy, slavery

and cannibalism, was inseparable from early and low stages of social life. I do not deny that war, like pestilence, famine and conflagration, has often helped forward the civilization of mankind, for thus does God make the wrath, as well as the agony of men, to praise him. I do not even deny that there have been times in the past when war, like the storms of the sea, has seemed to be unavoidable. What I do deny is that these facts of history touch in any remotest way the judgment of ethics and religion that war is wrong, or should swerve by so much as a hair's breadth the decision of any one of us to have nothing to do with it. War is in open and utter violation of Christianity. If war is right, then Christianity is wrong, false, a lie. If Christianity is right, then war is wrong, false, a lie. The God revealed by Jesus, and by every great spiritual leader of the race, is no God of battles. He lifts no sword—he asks no sacrifice of blood. He is the Father of all men, Jew and Gentile, bond and free. His spirit is love, his rule is peace, his method of persuasion is forgiveness. His law, as interpreted and promulgated by the Nazarene, is "love one another," "resist not evil with evil," "forgive seventy times seven," "overcome evil with good," "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you." Such a God and such a law, others may reconcile with war, if they can. I cannot—and what I cannot do, I will not profess to do.

But I must go farther—I must speak not only of war in general, but of this war in particular. Most persons are quite ready to agree, especially in the piping times of peace, that war is wrong. But let a war cloud no bigger than a man's hand, appear on the horizon of the nation's life, and they straightway begin to qualify their judgment, and if the war cloud grow until it covers all the heavens, they finally reverse it. This brings the curious situation of all war being wrong in general, and each war being right in particular! Germans denounce war, with the exception of course of the present conflict with England. Englishmen condemn war, but ex-

clude from their indictment the present fight against the Central Empires. Americans have been vociferous in their repudiation of war as a method of settling international disputes, but are now on the verge of accepting the first chance to draw the sword which the European cataclysm has offered. Therefore do I find it necessary to state not only what I think of war, but of this war which seems to-day so near at hand!

To criticize adversely a war in which one's native land is about to engage, or has already entered, is unusual, but fortunately not unknown. On February 4, 1847, amid the fever of public enthusiasm following the outbreak of the Mexican War, Theodore Parker, addressing a great anti-war meeting in Faneuil Hall, Boston, said, "This war had a mean and infamous beginning, and is being waged for a mean and infamous purpose. . . . I know but one war so bad in modern times, and that was the war for the partition of Poland." Four months later, in a sermon preached in the Boston Music Hall, at a time when thousands of American soldiers had been killed in battle, and other thousands were still pouring out their life-blood on Mexican soil, Theodore Parker again said, "We are waging a most iniquitous war. . . . We must refuse to take any part in it . . . encourage others to do the same . . . and aid men, if need be, who suffer because they refuse."

The Mexican War of 1847 may have been very different from the German War of 1917, but the spirit of free utterance here manifested by our greatest Unitarian preacher, is the same in every age. It was in accordance with this spirit that I stated in this place on Sunday, February 4 last, the day following the dismissal of Ambassador Bernstoff, that "nothing can conceivably be imagined which can justify war between America and Germany"; and it is in accordance with this same spirit, that I now reaffirm this judgment. I have no desire to substantiate it, since the argument raises dubious questions and would inevitably involve regrettable antagonisms. On the other hand, however, you are entitled to know my processes of thought and the reasons for my

conclusion. May I say, therefore, that the impending war at this moment seems to me to be wrong, since it has its origin in motives only less ignoble than those which drove us into conflict with Mexico just seventy years ago? If you tell me that this war is fought for the integrity of international law, I must ask you why it is directed only against Germany and not also against England, which is an equal although far less terrible violator of covenants between nations? If you say that it is fought on behalf of the rights of neutrals, I must ask you where, when and by which belligerent the rights of neutrals have been conserved in this war, and what guarantee you can offer that, after all our expenditure of blood and money for their defense, these rights will not be similarly violated all over again in the next war by any nation which is battling for its life? If you say that it is fought for the security of American property and lives, I must ask you how and to what extent it will be safer for our citizens to cross the seas after the declaration of war than it was before? If you say that it is fought in vindication of our national honor, I must ask you why no harm has come to the honor of other nations, such as Holland and Scandinavia, for example, which have suffered even more than we, but, for prudential reasons, refuse to take up arms? If you say that this is a war of defense against wanton and intolerable aggression, I must reply that every blow which we have endured has been primarily a blow directed not against ourselves but against England, and that it has yet to be proved that Germany has any intention or desire of attacking us. If you say that this war is a life-and-death struggle for the preservation of civilization against barbarism, I must ask you why we remained neutral when Belgium was raped, and were at last aroused to action not by the cries of the stricken abroad, but by our own losses in men and money? If you say that this war is a last resort in a situation which every other method, patiently tried, has failed to meet, I must answer that this is not true—that other ways and means of action, tried by experience and justi-

fied by success, have been laid before the administration and wilfully rejected.

||In its ultimate causes, this war is the natural product and expression of our unchristian civilization.|| Its armed men are grown from the dragon's teeth of secret diplomacy, imperialistic ambition, dynastic pride, greedy commercialism, economic exploitation at home and abroad. In the sowing of these teeth, America has had her part; and it is therefore only proper, perhaps, that she should have her part also in the reaping of the dreadful harvest. In its more immediate causes, this war is the direct result of unwarrantable, cruel, but none the less inevitable interferences with our commercial relations with one group of the belligerents. Our participation in the war, therefore, like the war itself, is political and economic, not ethical, in its character. Any honor, dignity, or beauty which there may be in our impending action, is to be found in the impulses, pure and undefiled, which are actuating many patriotic hearts to-day, and not at all in the real facts of the situation. The war itself is wrong. Its prosecution will be a crime. There is not a question raised, an issue involved, a cause at stake, which is worth the life of one blue-jacket on the sea or one khaki-coat in the trenches. I question the sincerity of no man who supports this war—I salute the devotion of every man who proposes to sustain it with his money or his blood. But I say to you that when, years hence, the whole of this story has been told, it will be found that we have been tragically deceived, and all our sacrifices been made in vain.

Statements of this kind, made on the eve of war, seem to many persons to be treasonable. The charge of "traitor" has already been flung against me, and will be flung again. To such a charge, I might be content to answer in the words of Patrick Henry, who, when similarly accused, cried out, "If this be treason, make the most of it." Wiser and kindlier was the reply of Theodore Parker who, when denounced as a traitor because of his steadfast opposition to the Mexican War,

said, "I think lightly of what is called treason against a government. That may be your duty to-day, or mine. . . . But treason against the people, against mankind, against God, is a great sin, not lightly to be spoken of." But I desire to go farther in this matter, and deny without evasion that anything that I have said, or may say, can be interpreted as traitorous or disloyal. In time of war as in time of peace, in the hour of sin as in the hour of glory, I shall love my country and serve her to the end. Nothing that she can do will end my affection or sever my allegiance. There are men who cast off their wives, if they be guilty of infidelity—but I would not do so with my wife. There are men who turn their daughters into the streets if they go wrong—but I would not do so with my daughter. There are men who refuse ever again to see sons, or friends, or comrades, if they are guilty of dishonesty or crime—but I would not act so in such a case. Nothing that any man or woman can do, least of all the ones to whom I am bound by ties of kindred or affection, shall remove them from my love, deny them my forgiveness, or exile them from my devotion. I will denounce sin with inexorable rigor. I will condone no fault, excuse no offense, exact the uttermost farthing of just punishment. But the one I love shall always be to me as my own soul. The greater the offense, the deeper shall be my offering of pity. As they that watch for the morning, shall I watch with tearful eyes, prayerful lips, compassionate heart, for the coming of the day of glad redemption, and when at last it dawns, rejoice and be exceeding glad!

So also with my relation to my country! Nothing that America can do, can quench my passion for her beauty, or divert my loyalty from her service. She is the only country I have, or shall ever have, and I propose that she shall be mine forever, in war or peace, in storm or calm, in evil or good. In this impending crisis with Germany, I believe that she is wrong. She seems to me to be faithless to her own supreme calling among the nations of the earth, disloyal to high interests of

humanity long since committed to her care, guilty for a selfish motive of a grievous fault. But her infidelity shall not shake my faith, her disloyalty shall not change my loyalty, her guilt shall not discharge my obligation. I shall decline to become, or to be made, "a man without a country." America has committed wrongs in the past, and she will undoubtedly commit other wrongs in the future. But she is mine, as Hosea's adulterous wife, Gomer, was his; and I will love her, dream of her, hope for her, serve her, without ceasing. "I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, in loving kindness and in tender mercy. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness, until thou shalt know the Lord."

And how shall I, a pacifist, serve my country in time of war?

When hostilities begin, it is universally assumed that there is but a single service which a loyal citizen can render to the state—that of bearing arms and killing the enemy. Will you understand me if I say, humbly and regretfully, that this I cannot, and will not, do. If any man or boy in this church answers the call to arms, I shall bless him as he marches to the front. When he lies in the trenches, or watches on the lonely sentinel-post, or fights in the charge, I shall follow him with my prayers. If he is brought back dead from hospital or battlefield, I shall bury him with all the honors not of war but of religion. He will have obeyed his conscience and thus performed his whole duty as a man. But I also have a conscience, and that conscience I also must obey. When, therefore, there comes a call for volunteers, I shall have to refuse to heed. When there is an enrollment of citizens for military purposes, I shall have to refuse to register. When, or if, the system of conscription is adopted, I shall have to decline to serve. If this means a fine, I will pay my fine. If this means imprisonment, I will serve my term. If this means persecution, I will carry my cross.|| No order of president or governor, no law of nation or state, no loss of reputation, freedom or life, will persuade me or force me to

this business of killing. On this issue, for me at least, there is "no compromise." Mistaken, foolish, fanatical, I may be; I will not deny the charge. But false to my own soul I will not be. Therefore here I stand. God help me! I cannot do other!

And this resolution applies, let me now be careful to state, quite as much to my professional as to my personal life. Once war is here, the churches will be called upon to enlist, as will every other social institution. Therefore would I make it plain that, so long as I am your minister, the Church of the Messiah will answer no military summons. Other pulpits may preach recruiting sermons; mine will not. Other parish houses may be turned into drill halls and rifle ranges; ours will not. Other clergymen may pray to God for victory for our arms; I will not. In this church, if nowhere else in all America, the Germans will still be included in the family of God's children. No word of hatred shall be spoken against them—no evil fate shall be desired upon them. War may beat upon our portals, like storm waves on the granite crags; rumors of war may thrill the atmosphere of this sanctuary as lightning the still air of a summer night. But so long as I am priest, this altar shall be consecrated to human brotherhood, and before it shall be offered worship only to that one God and Father of us all, "who hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell together on the face of the earth."

But if I will not, or cannot, either as man or minister, have part in the operations of war, how can I talk of such a thing as serving the nation? When the enemy is at the gates, what is there to do but to snatch up a sword, and fight? Let me tell you what there is to do. Let me specify at least four things which I propose to do.

First of all, I shall make it my duty to fulfill in word and deed the gracious tasks of what may be called the ministry of reconciliation. In a time of raging hate and brutal passion, I will keep alive that spirit of good-will toward men, through which alone a durable peace on earth may some day be established. When darkness

covers the earth and gross darkness the people, || I will keep burning my single torch, that there may somewhere still be light. || I will keep my heart pure of all distrust, vindictiveness, and fear. I will cherish confidence in the integrity and devotion of the German people. I will accept and glorify the unselfish patriotism of my countrymen who believe in and sustain the war. I will hold no feeling of ill-will against those of my friends and parishioners who may rend me in anger, spit upon me in contempt, or leave me in tears. When madness sweeps the land, I will preserve my sanity. When passion engulfs the people, I will retain my self-control. When hatred consumes men's hearts, I will keep sweet, wholesome and compassionate. If unfortunate aliens among us are seized and persecuted, I will protect them from the vengeance of my countrymen. If my comrades are reviled and stricken, I will sustain their courage and fortify their patience. If I am myself assailed in bitterness and contempt, I will speak no evil, but "bear all things" unperturbed. I will remember the starving millions of Belgium, Serbia, Poland and Armenia, whom my countrymen may neglect for the more important business of killing Germans. || I will remember the burden-bearers of my land who, in times of war as in times of peace, are still the victims of political corruption and economic injustice. || I will remember without distinction the peoples of all lands who bear this day the agonies laid upon them by the governments which deceive and use them. Always will I labor to keep open the choked and defiled channels of understanding, sympathy and goodwill between hostile nations and divided classes. And above all will I remember that, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, it is my business to preach and practise, not my passions as a man or my prejudices as an American, but that whole and perfect love which is of God. Thus in an age of unprecedented discord and disturbance, I will serve the ministry of reconciliation, and thus, I trust, my country in her best estate.

Secondly, I will serve my country in war time by serving the ideals of democracy which constitute the soul and

center of her being. War and democracy are incompatible. When war comes, democracy goes // England, fighting nobly to conquer Prussianism, is herself in process of being conquered by the Prussian spirit. Already in our own country, before the beginning of war, the dread work of militarism is under way. // Already freedom of thought is being denied, and liberty of conscience challenged. // Already we are in the midst of such an orgy of bigotry, intolerance and persecution for opinions' sake, as America has not seen since the days of the Salem witches. The whole fabric of democracy is threatened, the priceless heritage of our fathers in peril of loss. America has never been in such danger as she is to-day—and the source of the danger is at home and not abroad. // Hence my resolve to serve that America which I love so well that I would not have her made over into the likeness of the militarism which she clamors to destroy. I will do what I can to safeguard free thought and free speech, by practising both at any cost. I will do what I can to preserve liberty of conscience, by exercising that liberty without flinching. I will do what I can to guarantee to posterity the democratic ideals and institutions of America, by resisting to the death every assault upon their bulwarks. One such assault is now being made in the movement for universal military training. So long as I have breath to speak, or hand to lift a pen, I will oppose this monstrous thing. By conscription the autocracies of Europe have stood thus long. By conscription this war, perfectly prepared for, inevitably came. // By conscription the minds of men are "cribbed, cabined and confined" to the bounds of that narrow nationalism which is the fiercest foe of brotherhood. // By conscription the consciences of men are enslaved to the mastery of those who can command the sinking of the "Lusitania" and the shooting of Nurse Cavell. // By conscription, more effectually than by the attack of German legions, this country can be destroyed, and the fairest experiment of democracy the world has ever seen brought to an untimely end. // Therefore will I fight it, and all other devices of militaristic tyranny,

and thereby again exalt truly the best interests of my native land. //

Thirdly, I will serve my country at this time by preparing the way, so far as I am able, for the establishment of that peace which sooner or later must follow upon war. This struggle, into which now we are about to plunge, cannot go on forever. Some day the bugles must sing truce across the fields of battle, tired warriors ground arms, and statesmen sit in guarded council halls to make an end of strife. And this end must be an arrangement by which Germans and English, Russians and Turks, must continue to live side by side in a common world, engage in the interchange of business, learning and decent courtesy which make up ordered life, and cooperate in the common service of the common interests of our one humanity. This necessity of living together cannot be escaped. Germans, even though beaten to their knees, cannot be slaughtered in a universal massacre, and the race therewith exterminated. Englishmen, even though conquered, cannot flee to Saturn, Mars, or Jupiter, and colonize new planets as they have in other ages colonized new continents. For better or worse, this earth must be the single abode of all these scattered tribes and hostile peoples. Which means that peace must some day come, and the ordered relationships of peaceful living be some way reestablished! For the consummation of this end, preparation is necessary, and it must be initiated without delay. To discover terms of reconciliation, to work out methods of cooperation, to soften hate and dispell suspicion, to spread abroad sweet influences of confidence and healing—this is a task as beneficent as it is prodigious. Before she herself became a belligerent, this was the task appointed as by the fiat of God for America. // But now that she has cast away this sacred charge, it remains for us who cannot take up arms at her behest, to keep it in her stead. How better can we serve our country than by restoring to her, or fulfilling for her, that high mission of peace-making, which is so uniquely and divinely hers!

Lastly, I will serve my country in war time, by serving the dream of international brotherhood. No nation is worthy the allegiance of even the meanest of her citizenry, which is not dedicated to the establishment of that larger and more inclusive life of universal association, which is the glad promise of mankind. America, for more than a hundred years, has been first among the countries of the world, in recognition and service of this ideal. She has been a gathering place of all the tribes of earth—a melting-pot into which the ingredients of every race, religion and nationality have been poured. And out of it has come not so much a new nation as a new idea—the idea of brotherhood. This idea has stamped our people as a chosen people.¹ It has set our land apart as a holy land. It has exalted our destiny as a divine destiny. And now, with the plunge into the welter of contending European nationalities, all this is gone.¹ Gone, at least, if those of us who see not to-day's quarrel but to-morrow's prophecy, do not dedicate ourselves unfalteringly to the forgotten vision!¹ This I am resolved to do. I will serve America by serving her ideal of humanity. I will open my heart, as she has opened her shores, to all peoples of the earth. I will give love, as she has given hospitality, to the hated and hunted of God's children. And lo, from out my soul, as once from out her soil, shall grow "a tree of life," whose leaves are for "the healing of the nations."

This is my service for the days of war—the ministry of reconciliation, the defence of democracy,¹ the preparation of the gospel of peace, the quest of brotherhood. It is the deliberate espousal of that higher spiritual loyalty which is not so much the destruction as it is the fulfillment of those lower and more carnal loyalties which stir the envy and the hate of men. It is the deliberate resolve to "lengthen (the) cords and strengthen (the) stakes" which bind my spirit to the earth, that I may "enlarge the place of (my) tent, and stretch forth the curtains of (my) habitation." It is the deliberate purpose to face the eternal paradox of flesh and spirit, Caesar and Christ, kingdoms of earth and the kingdom of

heaven, the church visible and the church invisible, and choose "the better part." "For finer spirits . . . there are two dwelling places," says Romain Rolland in *Above the Battle*, "our earthly fatherland, and that other City of God. Of the one we are the guests, of the other the builders. To the one let us give our lives and faithful hearts; but neither family, friend, nor fatherland, nor ought that we love, has power over the spirit. The spirit is the light. It is our duty to lift it above tempests, and thrust aside the clouds which threaten to obscure it, to build higher and stronger, dominating the injustice and hatred of nations, the walls of that city wherein the souls of the whole world may assemble."

That you will follow me upon this road of travail, I cannot command and will not ask. // I reverence too deeply and cherish too tenderly not only my freedom but your own, to venture such an appeal to your good nature. But that you will be not unwilling to have your minister lead your church upon this road, I dare to hope. When confusion, death and terror are about us, I like to think that you will be glad to find in the refuge of this place, "those things which cannot be shaken." When cries of hate and lust are burdening the air, I like to think that you will rejoice to hear within this sanctuary the words that tell of "peace on earth, goodwill toward men." Even when the boys of this church, moved by exalted sense of duty, march to the front, there to slay and to be slain, I like to think that they will look back fondly to this altar and its priests, and thank God there is some witness still of better days and happier peoples. It is because I like to think these things that I hope my resignation as your minister will be neither expected nor demanded. It is because I have faith in your understanding of the church of God and its high mission upon earth, that I hope to continue to bear truthful witness in this pulpit, in war as in peace, to what I feel to be the will of God. It is because I have great love for you as friends and comrades, and no other desire upon earth than to serve you and the cause of free religion which you committed to my charge ten years ago, that I hope

God will be kind to me, and keep me still in the grace of your affection.

Such is my hope! I pray that it is well-founded. If not, I shall want to know. You have but to speak, and I will surrender my post to one who can safer guard it, and obediently though sadly go my way. The world is wide—so long as I have my soul to comrade, I shall not be lonely—and if I go down at last in failure and defeat, I shall find comfort in the thought that other and far better men than I have walked that road and met that end, but none of them all for a better or a grander cause. For America, for humanity, for God, I shall have lived and died. Than this no man can ask a happier fate.

“They out-talked thee, hissed thee, tore thee?
Better men fared thus before thee;
Fired their ringing shot and passed,
Hotly charged—and sank at last.

“Charge once more, then, and be dumb!
Let the victors, when they come,
When the forts of folly fall,
Find thy body by the wall!”



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